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## ***The Byzantine “Dark Ages”: Late Sixth and Seventh Centuries***

		250	500	750	1000	1250	1500
582–602	Maurice						
610	Herakleios emperor						
628	Victory over Persia						
634	Beginning of Arab invasions						
636	Battle of Yarmuk						
674–678	First Arab Siege of Constantinople						

## **Aftermath of the Age of Justinian**

Almost immediately after Justinian's death in 565 (some might say even before), the great edifice the emperor had built up quickly began to crumble. As we have already said, the causes for this are difficult to discern; one has to ask how much of the disaster was caused by the excess of the reign of Justinian and how much was a result of mistakes made by his successors; in addition, we have to be aware that the difficulties that fell upon Byzantium in this period were many and difficult, and one may wonder whether anyone could have done a better job. In the end, the state did survive – and Byzantine civilization with it. And the emperors rebuilt the Byzantine Empire on a new basis, one that was to lead the empire to its greatest days of prosperity and power. But before that recovery the empire was nearly destroyed.

### **Justin II (565–578)**

Justinian and Theodora had no children (although it was alleged that Theodora had children before she met Justinian). Justin II was the son of one of Justinian's sisters, and his wife was a niece of Theodora; Justinian had appointed his nephew to high office in the imperial palace and, when the old emperor died, Justin was easily able to seize the throne.

Throughout his reign Justin relied on the help of his wife Sophia, and she was the first Byzantine empress to appear regularly on coins alongside her husband: the two of them are pictured, seated side by side and dressed in full imperial regalia, on the voluminous copper coinage of the reign. Like her aunt, Sophia had a powerful personality and she had a following, in Constantinople and elsewhere, that was especially loyal to her. The emperor and empress appeared as a pair in many sculptures throughout Constantinople and they constructed the *Chrysotriklinos*, which was to become the main throne room in the imperial palace.

In foreign affairs Justin believed that the empire should enforce its policy by the force of arms, so he broke away from the policy of winning the barbarians' support through payment of tribute. Nonetheless, this was a difficult practice to maintain at that particular time. As we have seen, trouble was already brewing on the empire's northern frontier, and the situation first began to unravel in Italy. Only three years after the death of Justinian, in 568, the Lombards, yet another Germanic people, began their conquest of the country. The Byzantines maintained control of Ravenna and the lands immediately around it for some time, and Ravenna remained essentially a Byzantine city; in addition, the Byzantine Empire retained control of most of Calabria and Apulia in the south until the middle of the eleventh century, and Byzantine culture continued to influence the peninsula for centuries to come. Most of the rest of the country, however, was quickly lost to the Lombards. In Rome the popes maintained a precarious independence, relying largely on Byzantine military power to support them against the heretical Germans; the Lombards, it should be remembered, were Arians and there was a long history of antagonism between the heretical Germanic rulers of Italy and their Catholic Roman subjects. This provided the Byzantine emperor with an opportunity to remain involved in the politics of central Italy, although (as we have already seen) this policy had a religious aspect as well, since the popes and the Byzantine emperors did not always agree on matters of faith, and, increasingly, some emperors had to choose carefully between religious policies that might antagonize or please the pope.

During the reign of Justin II military problems were also evident on the

Danube frontier, where the Slavs had already begun to settle in Byzantine territory during the reign of Justinian, and in North Africa, where the Berbers remained a thorn in the side of the Byzantine administrators. In the East the situation quickly became critical. As we have seen, Justinian was able to turn his attention to the West largely by arranging a series of treaties with Persia at the cost of very heavy subsidies that contributed to the draining of the state coffers that characterized Justinian's administration. Justin II refused to pay the tributes approved by his uncle, and war broke out, fought at this time largely over Armenia. The results were, for the time, inconsequential, but this was the beginning of a period of some 50 years in which Byzantium and Persia were nearly constantly at war, usually to the disadvantage of the former.

In religious affairs Justin again went against the policies of Justin I and Justinian, seeking once again to find a compromise with the Monophysites. He abandoned the theological ideas of Justinian and advocated a return to the doctrines of the church as they existed before the Council of Chalcedon. He insisted on the recitation of the Creed of the Council of Constantinople in the churches, and he called leading theologians together in an attempt to find a compromise. He even resurrected the idea of the *Henotikon*, forbidding the discussion of issues connected with Chalcedon. All these efforts were for naught, however, and Justin once again turned to force in an attempt to bring the Monophysites back into communion with the official church.

Justin apparently suffered from some kind of mental illness, and his behavior became more and more bizarre: apparently the emperor occasionally bit members of the court, and he would spend hours listening to organ music. Sophia saw the danger posed by this instability, and in 574 she convinced Justin to name the handsome courtier Tiberios as caesar. From then until Justin's death in 578 Tiberios and Sophia effectively ruled the empire.

## **Tiberios Constantine (578–582)**

During the last four years of Justin II's life Tiberios reversed many of the emperor's policies, purchasing the support of the Avars, for example, with a lavish gift, reducing taxes, and spending money on various construction projects.

After Justin's death, the widowed Sophia sought to maintain her own power, and she apparently demanded that Tiberios (hereafter known as Tiberios Constantine) divorce his wife and marry her. She was, however, outwitted by Tiberios, and her influence began to decline. In foreign affairs Tiberios sought at

first to regain Italy through a military campaign against the Lombards. He had to fight wars on three fronts, and he ultimately sought to neutralize the Lombards through political intrigue. Tiberios' most successful general was Maurice, who was able to win significant battles against the Persians. The emperor's focus on the eastern frontier forced him to neglect the Balkans, where the Avars had built up a powerful empire of their own. Among the allies (or subjects) of the Avars were the Slavs, and their first large-scale raids into Byzantine territory seem to have taken place during the reign of Tiberios.

## Maurice (582–602)

During his 20-year reign it seemed as though the emperor Maurice might restore some semblance of stability to the Byzantine state. He had already demonstrated his ability as a military commander, and in 582 Tiberios Constantine had made him caesar; after the older emperor's death, Maurice married Tiberios' daughter. Maurice was a good general in his own right, and the first emperor to take the field himself since Theodosios I. He was careful in his choice of competent generals and administrators to help him, and he was a good and thoughtful ruler, who took steps to reverse the centralization that had characterized state policy since the time of Diocletian, and even more since the time of Justinian. He recognized the reality that the reconquered parts of the West (Italy and North Africa) were under constant military threat and that the governors there needed to have both civil and military power. Thus, he formally created the Exarchates of Ravenna and Carthage, ruled by exarchs whose powers combined civil and military authority, which went against the previous tenets of state policy. This arrangement was both logical and necessary, and it may have been a forerunner of the later *theme* system (a new system of provinces which will be discussed later), but at the same time it did have the effect of making these regions more autonomous than they would otherwise have been, and this created a long-term danger for the stability of the central administration.

Maurice was generally successful in his wars against Persia and in 591 a rare opportunity came his way. There was a dispute for the Persian throne and Chosroes II, the grandson of Chosroes I, sought Maurice's help, fled to Byzantine territory, and may even have married the emperor's daughter. Maurice dispatched several of his best generals to help Chosroes in his ultimately successful attempt to regain the throne. The result was a peace treaty (591), remarkably favorable to Byzantium and actually ceding a large portion of

Armenia to the empire. Peace on the Persian frontier allowed Maurice to adopt an aggressive foreign policy elsewhere, and Byzantine influence was at a high point in the disputed area of the Caucasus. Maurice had already, at the beginning of his reign, been able to break up the confederacy of the Ghassanid Arabs, who had been a primary ally of Byzantium along the southeastern frontier against the Persians and the desert Bedouin. As a result of this shift of policy the empire was now able to forge floating alliances with a larger number of Arab groups.

In the West the situation was not nearly so positive. Most of the Byzantine possessions in Spain were lost to the Visigoths by ca. 584, although there was still a presence there until the 620s. North Africa remained officially in Byzantine hands until the Arab conquests of the seventh century, but the area was far from secure, since Berber tribesmen attacked the settled centers and made Byzantine control very difficult. Until this time North Africa apparently maintained the agricultural fertility that had made it the bread basket of the western

### **Box 7.1 The Marriage of Maurice and Constantina (582)**

On his deathbed the emperor Tiberios II Constantine had signified his choice of Maurice as his successor by announcing his engagement to his daughter Constantina. Soon after the elder emperor's death the pair were crowned emperor and empress, and shortly after that they were married in the imperial palace in a ceremony with special brilliance.

The royal bridal chamber had been magnificently arrayed within the circuit of the first great precinct of the palace, adorned with gold and princely stones, and furthermore empurpled with crimson hangings of priceless deep-tinged Tyrian dye. The daughter of Tiberius, the virgin bride, preceded the emperor to the bridal throne, as though in hiding, shortly to be seen by the people when the fine curtains were suddenly thrown apart as if at an agreed signal. At once the emperor arrived at the bridal chamber, magnificently escorted by many whiterobed men. And so he entered within the lofty curtains to escort the queen to the presence of the onlookers and to embrace her. The emperor's bridal attendant was present; this man was an imperial eunuch, Margarites by name, a distinguished man in the royal household. The queen rose from her throne to honour her bridegroom the emperor, while the factions chanted the bridal hymn. In full view of the people the bride's attendant saluted the bridal pair with a cup, for it was not right to put on crowns, since they were not in fact private individuals who were being married: for this action had already been anticipated by their royal title [in other words, the bride and groom had already been crowned as emperor and empress and they did not, therefore, need the crowns that are a particular part of the wedding ceremony of the eastern church]. (Theophylakt Simokatta 1.10.6–9, trans. M. Whitby and M. Whitby, pp. 33–4)

Maurice had special gold medallions struck to commemorate the marriage and an important group of these has been found. Four of the medallions, along with 12 gold coins, were strung on a belt which might have been worn around the waist or draped from the neck. It is possible, even, that the

belt was worn by someone (even the emperor or empress) at the wedding itself. On the obverse of the medallion Maurice is shown holding a scepter and *mappa*, a bag or cloth used in the imperial appearances before the crowd, especially in the hippodrome. On the reverse the emperor is shown in a triumphal four-horse chariot; he holds a globe surmounted by a statue of victory – the symbol of universal dominion – and to his right is the Christogram (“Chi-Rho,” the superimposed Greek letters *ch* and *r*, the first two characters in the word *Christ*).

Less than a year after the wedding Constantina gave birth to the first of the couple’s nine children. For a time, she had to share the title of empress with her mother Ino and even Sophia, the widow of the long-dead Justin II. Toward the end of the reign relations between Maurice and Constantina became strained, perhaps as a result of different attachments to the circus factions. Constantina and her three daughters survived for a time after the fall of Maurice, but they were later put to death by Phokas.

Mediterranean and on which the rich urban life of the region was based. The Berber raids, however, along with general insecurity and possibly climatic change, led to significant desertification, leaving North Africa the poor and nearly resourceless area it has been into modern times.

In Italy the Lombards emerged from a period of internal dissension, first under Autari, who took the title of king in 584, and then Agilulf (590–616), and they were able to stabilize their conquest of much of the country. In 593 Pope Gregory I sought to demonstrate his independence of Byzantium by signing a peace treaty with the Lombards on his own, but this could ultimately be enforced only in 598 with the aid of the exarch of Ravenna. Nevertheless, Gregory organized the papacy into a powerful organization that began to make claims for ecclesiastical dominance in the whole West.

Maurice’s concern for the West and his consciousness of the old imperial ideal is evident in arrangements he drew up in 597, when he was seriously ill. He planned to leave his eldest son, Theodosios, to rule the East from Constantinople, while his second son, Tiberios, was to rule the West, not from Ravenna but from Rome. There is even a suggestion in the sources that his two remaining sons were to control other parts of the state, thus reviving, in effect, the idea of the Tetrarchy (although in one family).

Domestically, Maurice experienced considerable difficulty with the circus factions who, under his reign, finally recovered most of the power they had enjoyed before the Nika Revolt. Indeed, for reasons that are not entirely clear, factional rioting, murder, and destruction of property became endemic at this time, not only in Constantinople but in all the cities of the East. Discontent also spread to the army, giving rise to a dangerous spirit of disobedience and willingness to revolt. Ultimately, this was to spell the end of Maurice.

Maurice was one of the many Byzantine emperors who wrote surviving texts, in this case a military handbook, the *Strategikon*. This was a practical guide for military operations, making use of the emperor's considerable firsthand experience. Interestingly enough, the handbook calls for the replacement of mercenary troops, common in the period, by a peasant militia. The book is also of special importance because of its description of foreign peoples (Franks, Lombards, Avars, Turks, and Slavs).

Since the beginning of his reign the army of Maurice had been on the defensive against the Avars and the Slavs in the Balkans. The Avars were a nomadic, mixed people, perhaps of Turkic origin, from Central Asia and we first hear about them in 558 when Justinian made an alliance with them to help instill order among the barbarians north of the Danube. The Avar confederacy, like that of many other Central Asian conquerors, was militarily powerful but politically unstable and ultimately ephemeral. The Avars were mounted warriors who needed people like the Slavs to fight more conventional infantry battles. The Avar chieftains amassed great wealth, and excavated Avar tombs contain enormous quantities of gold and intricate metalwork, including cavalry accoutrements and ornamental belts; the goods include both local Avar work and items imported from Constantinople.

In 580 the Avars had demanded that Tiberios surrender the important city of Sirmium, which had been for some time the most important city in the Balkans. The emperor – or in reality Maurice (who, as we have seen, was already in charge of affairs) – refused, but difficulties in the East prevented his sending sufficient forces to defend the city, and in 582 the empire agreed to hand it over to the Avars, on condition that the inhabitants be allowed to leave in safety. The fall of Sirmium was a symbol of the military situation: the Danube frontier had essentially collapsed and the Byzantine Empire lost effective control of much of the Balkans.

Maurice, however, did not accept this situation; he devoted significant energy to the area and, year after year, his troops campaigned in the Balkans. The peace with Persia in 591 allowed him to focus even more of his attention there. Imperial troops crossed the Danube, beginning in 593, and the Avar confederation showed signs of dissolution. Nonetheless, the order to the troops to spend the winter of 602 across the Danube led to a military revolt that quickly found support in Constantinople, among both the senators and the circus factions, with the Greens and the Blues uniting against Maurice, whom they regarded as too stern in his control of their activity. Phokas, a low-ranking army

officer, led the revolt of the army and marched toward Constantinople, claiming that he was going to put Maurice's son Theodosios (or, alternatively, Maurice's father-in-law) on the throne. In this situation the factions revolted, and this spelled the doom of the emperor. Maurice and his sons were all executed and Phokas was proclaimed emperor with the blessing of the Senate.

## Phokas (602–610)

The reign of the emperor Phokas is generally viewed both by contemporaries and by modern historians as one of almost unmitigated disaster. As mentioned above, Maurice and most of his family were murdered in an especially brutal fashion, and the whole fabric of life in Constantinople seemed to come apart. Although Phokas was initially supported by members of the Senate, his government quickly began a series of what can only be called judicial murders. These naturally gave rise to real conspiracies against the emperor, which in turn led to a greater persecution of the aristocracy. The Green circus faction, which had initially supported Phokas, turned against him for some reason, while the Blue faction came to support the government. The result was almost continual violence among faction members, not only in Constantinople but elsewhere as well, and this naturally had a destabilizing effect on society as a whole.

Phokas added to the difficult situation by raising religious issues that inflamed many citizens of the empire. On the one hand, Phokas took a strongly Chalcedonian position, in contrast to the more pragmatic policies of his predecessors, who had not made any prolonged attempt to control the Monophysites. This led to persecution of Monophysites in the East and a natural resistance to

### Box 7.2 Circus Faction Violence under Phokas

It is difficult to know how to understand or characterize the situation in the Byzantine Empire under the emperor Phokas (602–10). Our sources are almost universally hostile to Phokas and they have nothing but evil things to say about him. It would seem that normal social relations dissolved and there were few institutions that were able to act effectively. One of those institutions that survived was the circus factions, which for centuries had attracted young men and essentially encouraged them to acts of wanton violence. After the suppression of the factions in the Nika Revolt, they obviously survived, perhaps as “underground” organizations for a time, but in the late sixth century they once again came to the fore, attacking each other and unsuspecting citizens alike.

There has been considerable scholarly interest in the factions, largely in an attempt to understand why they would have attracted adherents and whether they were, in fact, political organizations or

simply gangs of hooligans. In the past, many historians saw them as early forms of political organizations, with ideology and a politicoeconomic agenda. Modern scholarship, however, has generally tended to regard them as simple hoodlums. The question is, nevertheless, open to discussion.

The following extract is taken from a sermon given in Thessaloniki in honor of the local St. Demetrios. The speaker sets the scene of the “dark days” in which we live, and uses factional violence to exemplify the difficulties of the time. Remember that this is a moralistic sermon that may exaggerate things for effect, but there is surely some truth in the contemporary description:

You all know only too well what a cloud of dust the devil has stirred up under the successor of Maurice of blessed memory, for he has stifled love and sown mutual hatred throughout the whole east, in Cilicia and Asia and Palestine and all the regions round, even up to the gates of the imperial city itself; the demes [the circus factions], not satisfied with shedding the blood of their fellow demesmen in the streets, have forced their way into others' houses and mercilessly murdered those within, throwing down alive from the upper stories women and children, young and old, who were too weak to save themselves by flight; in barbarian fashion they have plundered their fellow-citizens, their acquaintances and relations, and have set fire to their houses. (*Miracula S. Demetrii*, trans. in G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, rev. edn (New Brunswick, NJ, 1969), p. 84, n. 4)

imperial policy. In addition, in the late sixth century Pope Gregory the Great had generated a controversy by objecting to the use of the term “ecumenical patriarch” (meaning patriarch of the whole empire) by the bishop of Constantinople. Maurice had essentially ignored the controversy, but Phokas supported the papal position and he even addressed an edict to the contemporary pope, Boniface III, expressly recognizing the bishop of Rome as the head of the whole church. Such a position, naturally, did not win any support for Phokas, either from Monophysites or from Chalcedonians, who wished to maintain the prerogatives of the church of Constantinople.

Meanwhile, and perhaps most significantly, the defenses of the empire, built up at such expense by Maurice and his predecessors, essentially collapsed, and the Byzantine state nearly ceased to exist. The first blow fell when Chosroes II used the overthrow of his ally Maurice as an excuse to attack Byzantium, and he bolstered his claim by asserting that Maurice's son Theodosios (who had, in fact, been killed) was campaigning with him. The great frontier city of Dara was taken and Persian troops marched into the heart of Asia Minor, taking Caesarea and even reaching the shores of the Bosphorus. The Byzantine effort at resistance was hampered by disagreement; at least one Byzantine commander opened the doors of his city to the Persians and assisted at the coronation of “Theodosios” as emperor. Phokas sought to secure peace in the Balkans with a huge payment to the Avar khan, and the result of this was that the Byzantine military presence in the Balkans essentially evaporated and cities were left to

their own defenses against plundering groups of Avars and Slavs.

The military debacle, of course, led the emperor to find scapegoats, and his government continued to execute leading commanders and members of the aristocracy. This situation, along with military catastrophe, only encouraged further revolts. One of these was successful in putting an end to the bloody reign of Phokas. In 608 Herakleios, the exarch of Carthage, revolted against Phokas and dispatched a fleet toward the capital. Phokas had no troops to meet the challenge and discontented provincials began to flock to the standard of revolt, which was soon taken over by the exarch's son, also named Herakleios. Egypt joined the revolt and immediately cut the grain supply to Constantinople. Raising supporters as he went, the younger Herakleios arrived outside Constantinople on October 3, 610, and Phokas' government collapsed almost immediately: the emperor was summarily executed and the colors of the Blue faction burned in an outpouring of popular rage. On October 5 Herakleios entered Constantinople and was crowned emperor by the patriarch Sergios. The empire had a new and vigorous ruler, one of the real heroes of Byzantine history and a fascinating character in his own right, but he immediately had to face a very difficult situation, since nearly all the institutions of state had collapsed and the capital was surrounded by its powerful enemies.

## **Slavic Invasions and the Causes of the “Dark Ages”**

The accession of Herakleios to the throne is a good opportunity to step back and look briefly at some of the major historical issues and problems that affect our understanding of the later sixth and seventh centuries, specifically the question of the Slavic settlement of the Balkans and the issue of the so-called Byzantine Dark Ages.

The problem of the settlement of the Slavs in Byzantine territory is a very difficult one, in part because it has significant political ramifications, not least because the various modern Slavic peoples of southeast Europe generally connect their national origins with this phenomenon.

Until fairly recently, most scholars looked at the Slavic migrations in much the same way as the Germanic invasions were viewed: the various Slavic peoples had some common “homeland” (somewhere northeast of the Byzantine Empire) and, from the second half of the sixth century, they began to conquer parts of

former Byzantine territory and establish new homes there. Scholars today know that this phenomenon was much more complex, lasting hundreds of years, and that it is probably incorrect to think of Slavic peoples as clearly defined entities before they came into contact with Byzantium. In addition, it is now generally agreed that the people who lived in the Balkans after the Slavic “invasions” were probably for the most part the same as those who had lived there earlier, although the creation of new political groups and the arrival of small numbers of immigrants caused people to look at themselves as distinct from their neighbors, including the Byzantines.

The sixth-century western historian Jordanes claimed that there were three groups of Slavs: the Venethi, the Antae, and the Sclaveni, each of which, in his time, lived in different areas outside the Byzantine Empire. By the middle of the sixth century Byzantium began to make use of Slavic groups as *foederati*, but many of them simply crossed the Danube and settled on imperial territory on their own. Justinian’s considerable effort to fortify this frontier apparently had little effect. The Slavs occasionally joined with the Cotrigurs (or Cotrigur Bulgars) in their attacks on Byzantine territory, and after 576 many of them had become part of the Avar confederation. Although some modern groups would like to trace their descent back to them, the Avars ultimately disappeared as a people. However, the Slavs, in the wake of Avar military action, settled in most parts of the Balkans and they make up the dominant ethnic groups in the region today.

The *Miracles of St. Demetrios* reports that the Slavs attacked Thessaloniki many times, beginning in the late sixth century; although the city was not taken, most of its hinterland was settled by newcomers. Likewise, the *Chronicle of Monemvasia*, an important but controversial history of southern Greece, says that the Slavs occupied most of the Peloponnesos and were independent of Byzantine rule for a period of 218 years, that is, from 587/8 to 804/5. Not surprisingly, the “facts” presented by the *Chronicle of Monemvasia* have been subject to considerable debate, and the text has its defenders and detractors, not least because the issue of the alleged Slavic domination of southern Greece has important ramifications for territorial and self-definitional claims by Greeks and the various Slavic peoples, not to speak of westerners who wish to categorize the peoples of eastern Europe in one way or another. At least we can say that although this period was clearly one of instability, and although new people undoubtedly did move into the area formerly controlled by Byzantium, the idea of the Balkans being “overrun” by Slavs is both simplistic and not very helpful

for our understanding of the events. Probably more significantly, most of the cities of the Balkan area ceased to exist in the late sixth and/or the seventh century, and social life changed dramatically.

**Figure 7.1** Byzantine fortress on the island of Dokos. This now deserted island off the coast of the Argolid in southern Greece was an important naval base and fortification during the seventh century, when the Arabs first began to challenge Byzantine power at sea. The island lay astride the commercial and military sea lanes between Constantinople and Italy and it was fortified, at least in part, to help the Byzantines keep this line of communication open despite Arab raids and victories at sea. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



Thus, to return to the broader issue of what happened in the late sixth or the early seventh century, we should try to understand why and how Byzantine political and military control essentially disappeared from most of the Balkans. As an important counterpoint, many cities had previously suffered the fate of Sirmium: we have already seen that Rome was sacked in AD 410 and Antioch was taken by the Persians several times in this period. Nonetheless, in all these cases, the cities were rebuilt, while Sirmium and many other cities sacked in the late sixth and seventh centuries never recovered or did so very slowly over the next four or five centuries. Seen in this way, the invasions of the period were not the cause of the difficulties that followed but one of the results of much deeper problems in the political, economic, and possibly demographic situation of the time. It has, in the past, been easy to put the blame for these problems on a variety of culprits, most simply, the invasions of the period – first the Slavs and then, in the East, the Arabs. Yet, it is easy to see that this explanation cannot be maintained, if only because there had always been invasions and military defeats, but the broader polity had survived. Likewise, it is easy to cite

phenomena such as plagues and earthquakes – events which surely did happen but whose connection with the apparent abandonment of cities and the precipitous decline in the economy is difficult to determine. Finally, as we have seen, it has become customary to blame Justinian for the events of the last half of the sixth century, citing his alleged fixation on the West (and thus a supposed ignoring of the Balkans and Persia) and his arguably spendthrift policies. But – as we have already said – it is probably unfair to blame an emperor for things that happened well after his death.

In recent years, many historians have come to look at the events of the latter half of the sixth century in rather different ways. One approach has sought to view the changes in this period as based on the most fundamental units of society. Thus, scholars such as Alexander Kazhdan have argued that this period witnessed a collapse in the broader city-based or state-based social groupings, which resulted in the identification of individuals with small units such as the family. This change led to the significant weakening of the state. Other scholars have pointed to environmental changes, including the alleged (not fully proven) desertification of much of the southeastern rim of the Byzantine Empire, which had once been a primary producer of grain and other goods and which now became desert. Others look to more practical administrative and military matters, pointing out that the Byzantine state in the late sixth century did not have in place workable institutions for the recruitment and integration of troops, the result being the growing ineffectiveness of the Byzantine army and its inability to defeat the very different enemies who appeared from time to time.

On the one hand, the question of why the Byzantine Empire went, in the span of 50 to 100 years, from being the dominant power (economically, culturally, and militarily) in the Mediterranean area to one whose very existence was in question is simply too difficult for historians to answer in a simplistic manner. Certainly, the combination of civil war, religious dissension, and ineffective leadership had important ramifications. On the other hand, the general condition of the empire and the nature of its enemies (at least until the rise of Islam) had not changed greatly. It is attractive for many to turn to explanations outside the control of human affairs – such as earthquakes, plagues, or even climatic or environmental change. These “explanations” are often favored simply because they are more or less mechanistic and do not necessarily require human intervention (or blame). Nonetheless, attractive as such theories are, the evidence to support them is not, to date at least, very convincing. This is not to say that such disasters did not occur – they certainly did – but just as with the invasions

of the period, they had happened before, and the question really concerns whether the empire was able to deal with them.

Furthermore, real questions have arisen about the chronology of the crisis. Traditionally, historians have seen the crux of the problem in the half-century after Justinian. Now, however, many historians have increasingly turned to archaeological evidence and they have come to two very different conclusions. One group sees the onset of decline well before the time of Justinian, in the early sixth century, if not before, and they argue that the decline was not a precipitous collapse after the reign of Justinian but a much slower phenomenon that developed over many generations. Another, perhaps more vocal, group of historians argues that the difficulties of the late sixth century were not insurmountable but rather problems like those that Byzantium had overcome in many other periods and that, in fact, the Byzantine Empire was in a good condition as it entered the seventh century. In this view, the problems that ultimately developed were the result of the Byzantine inability to deal, initially at least, with the threat posed by the explosive expansion of Islam. Interestingly enough, against the background of these difficulties emerged some of the more creative representations of Byzantine spirituality, such as John Klimakos, who lived on Mount Sinai and developed the apophatic ideas of scholars such as Pseudo-Dionysios into a set of admonitions for daily life and the ascent to God.

## **Herakleios (610–641)**

Herakleios came to the throne in a moment of crisis in 610. The Balkans, as we have seen, were essentially lost to the empire, and the war with Persia was going very badly, since the death of Phokas did not diminish Chosroes' desire for a victory over Byzantium. The army in the East fortunately retained some degree of cohesion and it sought resolutely to deflect the Persian advance. Shortly after Herakleios' accession, however, the Persians defeated the Byzantine army near Antioch, and they moved both into Asia Minor and southward, taking Damascus and, in 614, Jerusalem. They sacked the Holy City, destroyed the church of the Holy Sepulchre, built by Constantine, and carried off the Holy Cross (supposedly the actual cross used in the crucifixion) to the Persian capital of Ctesiphon.

Herakleios managed to gain some time through negotiation with his enemies and especially through the payment of an increasingly large subsidy to the Avar khan. In this he was assisted, as in many other ways, by the patriarch Sergios,

who allowed significant quantities of the church treasure to be melted down for the emperor's use. (Some historians believe that at this time Herakleios began a radical reorganization of the state, but most think this took place afterward; the so-called *theme* system will be discussed at a later point in this chapter.)

Herakleios also used this time to train the army in new tactics, especially the use of light-armed mounted archers, and he supervised this personally, against the advice of his ministers, who thought he should avoid taking the field himself. By 622 Herakleios felt he was ready for the counterattack against the Persians. He launched this by striking north into Armenia, forcing the Persians to abandon their fortifications in Asia Minor, and the emperor was victorious in a critical battle on Armenian soil. Over the next few years Herakleios remained on the offensive and he was able to take a number of cities, including the important Persian religious city of Ganzak, where he destroyed the firetemple of Zoroaster in revenge for the destruction of Jerusalem. The Persians, however, counterattacked, and the most serious threat came in 626, when the Persians and the Avars combined to attack Constantinople itself. The emperor was on campaign in the Caucasus and the defense of the city was in the hands of the patriarch Sergios. The Persians, under their general Shahrbaraz, encamped at Chalcedon, but they had no ships to transport them across the Bosphorus. These were provided by the Slavs, who knew the technology of basic shipbuilding, although their vessels – while probably not dugout canoes (as some historians think) – were hardly a match for the ships of the Byzantine navy. The Land Walls of Constantinople were enough to frustrate two Avar direct attacks, and when the Slavs set out to transport the Persians over to the European side, the Byzantine navy sailed out of the Golden Horn and devastated the “armada.” Another Avar attack also failed and the siege was called off; Constantinople had been saved, and Herakleios was able to press his advantage into the Persian heartland. He spent most of 627 in a successful attempt to subdue the Caucasus and then surprised the Persians by marching into Mesopotamia in December. A battle near Nineveh was a decisive Byzantine victory and Herakleios pursued Chosroes through northern Iraq. The next year (628) there was a revolt in Persia and Chosroes was overthrown and executed.

Herakleios had won a complete victory. The new ruler, Shahrbaraz, was willing to make remarkable concessions, including acceptance of Christianity and the recognition of Herakleios as his son's protector. Although only a few years earlier it had looked as though the Byzantine Empire might disappear, by 628 it had decisively defeated its old rival and was definitely in control of the

East. The Holy Cross was restored to Jerusalem and in 630 Herakleios entered the city to celebrate the triumph, one that he had won in large part by his own personal courage, determination, and military skill.

## Theological Problems

Like virtually all Byzantine emperors, Herakleios had to deal with religious issues and the way that Christianity seemed to divide his subjects rather than unite them. The issue was particularly acute for him once he had recovered the East, and Monophysitism again became a pressing consideration. The patriarch Sergios took the lead in attempting yet again to find some compromise between the two theological sides. He sought to do this with the doctrine of Monoergism, which taught that although Christ had a human and a divine nature, he had a single “energy.” The emperor and the patriarch pushed this compromise and they had some initial success; the pope seemed willing to agree, and several important Monophysite clerics were supportive as well. Sophronios, the powerful patriarch of Jerusalem, resisted and demanded nothing less than the full acceptance of Chalcedon, and soon the position of the Monophysites likewise hardened. Sergios therefore rethought the matter and suggested yet another compromise, proposing the doctrine that Christ had a single “will.” Herakleios supported the teaching of Monotheletism (the doctrine of the single will) and in 638 he officially declared it to be imperial policy in a decree called the *Ekthesis*, which was publicly posted in Hagia Sophia. This “solution” to the religious problem was no more successful than any of the earlier attempts. Just like the *Henotikon* before it, the *Ekthesis* was rejected by Chalcedonians and Monophysites alike, and it served only to harden the position of the two sides and further undermined the ability of the emperor to determine religious belief by imperial fiat.

Chalcedonian opposition to Monotheletism was led by the remarkable theologian Maximos the Confessor. Maximos was a monk and a follower of Sophronios of Jerusalem, but he accepted an appointment as secretary at the court of Herakleios in Constantinople. Speaking out openly against any doctrine other than that of Chalcedon, he publicly denied the emperor’s right to

### Box 7.3 The Persistence of Pagan Practice: Canons of the Council in Trullo (691/692)

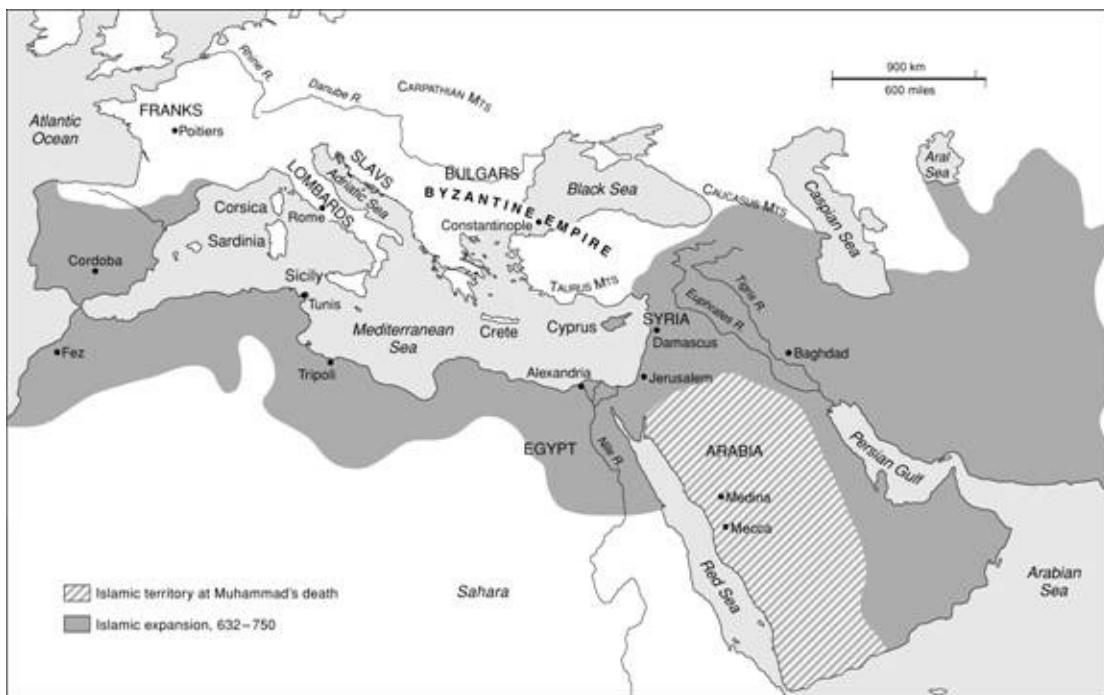
It is clear that some practices derived from paganism continued to survive into the Byzantine period. Some of these apparently were connected with ancient festivals of the gods Pan (the so-called Bota) and Dionysos (the Brumalia). These festivals were no longer closely associated with religion, but rather were opportunities for dancing, drinking, and general carousing – much, perhaps, like the modern Mardi Gras. The bishops assembled for the Council in Trullo were shocked by such behavior and one of the canons (decrees) condemned the festivals, but also provides us with important evidence of the kind of behavior that was apparently still going on, well into the Byzantine Empire:

### **CANON LXII**

The so-called Calends, and what are called Bota and Brumalia, and the full assembly which takes place on the first of March, we wish to be abolished from the life of the faithful. And also the public dances of women, which may do much harm and mischief. Moreover we drive away from the life of Christians the dances given in the names of those falsely called gods by the Greeks whether of men or women, and which are performed after an ancient and un-Christian fashion; decreeing that no man from this time forth shall be dressed as a woman, nor any woman in the garb suitable to men. Nor shall he assume comic, satyric, or tragic masks; nor may men invoke the name of the execrable Bacchus when they squeeze out the wine in the presses; nor when pouring out wine into jars [to cause a laugh], practising in ignorance and vanity the things which proceed from the deceit of insanity. Therefore those who in the future attempt any of these things which are written, having obtained a knowledge of them, if they be clerics we order them to be deposed, and if laymen to be cut off. (*A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (New York, 1890; repr. Grand Rapids, MI, 1955), vol. 14, ed. H. R. Percival, p. 393)

be involved in the definition of doctrine. Fearing for his life, Maximos fled to North Africa ca. 630, but from there he kept up a steady stream of invective against Monotheletism and imperial religious policy. As we will see below, Maximos was important in the resistance offered by Pope Martin I to the religious policy of Konstans II.

**Map 7.1** Islamic conquests to AD 750 (after Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 5th edn (Belmont, CA, 2003), map 7.6, p. 187)



## The Arab Invasions

It is a striking irony that Herakleios' total victory over the Persians was followed almost immediately by the permanent loss of virtually the whole of the Byzantine East to the Arabs. As a result of the Persian wars the resources of the Byzantine state were stretched to the breaking point, and the emperor must have looked forward to a long period of peace in which prosperity might be restored. On the contrary, in 634 – only six years after Herakleios' victory over the Persians and two years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad – the Arabs broke into Byzantine territory and within two years they had essentially gained control of the Byzantine East, including Syria and Palestine.

This is not the place for a discussion of the origins of Islam and the development of the Arab caliphate; the reader who lacks a basic knowledge of these events would be advised to look at a good summary of early Islamic history. It is clear, however, that the Prophet Muhammad and the early Islamic tradition grew up in a world with strong connections to Byzantium. Muhammad himself was fully aware of both Judaism and Byzantine Christianity, and the Prophet lived on the frontier of the Byzantine Empire, which he almost certainly visited.

Much of the later part of the Prophet's life was devoted to the establishment of a stridently monotheistic new religion among the strongly polytheistic peoples of

the Arabian peninsula. This was a difficult task, marked by violence toward the Muslims and many setbacks for Islam. By the time of Muhammad's death in 632, however, most of the peninsula had at least formally accepted Islam, and Abu Bakr, the first caliph (successor of the Prophet), could claim at least the formal allegiance of most people living in the peninsula. Abu Bakr's successor was the caliph 'Umar (634–44), who began the military campaigns that led to the rapid expansion of Islam and the caliphate.

In 634 'Umar invaded Syria and won a number of victories against Byzantine armies, including the conquest of Damascus. At first the Byzantines had not taken this invasion seriously, since Arab raiders had frequently caused difficulties in that area. By 636, however, Herakleios had become alarmed, and he organized a huge expeditionary force, perhaps as large as 100,000 men, and dispatched it against the Arabs. 'Umar initially pulled back from the north of Syria but offered battle in the Yarmuk Valley (a tributary of the Jordan River in Palestine; Map 9.1). Dissension among the Byzantine commanders, the effectiveness of the Arab horsemen, and a sudden dust storm led to the destruction of the whole Byzantine army and left all of Syria and Palestine open to 'Umar's forces. Led by the patriarch Sophronios, the people of Jerusalem held

### Box 7.4 Theophanes on Muhammad and the Origins of Islam

The growth of Islam was one of the most important historical developments, not only for seventh-century Byzantium, but also for the history of the whole world. The relationship between Byzantines and Muslims was always a close one, and the Byzantines naturally regarded the Muslims as the greatest of their rivals. At first, however, the Byzantines were taken by surprise by the sudden rise of Islam, and they generally viewed the new religion as a heretical version of Christianity.

Much of our information on early Byzantine knowledge of and attitudes toward Islam comes from the chronographer Theophanes, a Byzantine monk and a fanatical supporter of image veneration in Byzantium, who wrote shortly after AD 814. His account of the origins of Islam is marked by the acceptance of scurrilous rumor, as well as an acquaintance with genuine Muslim tradition. Thus, in the passage that follows Theophanes characterizes the revelation of Islam as a calculated ruse on the part of the Prophet, while, at the same time, he clearly follows a Sunni Muslim tradition, since his text makes a point of saying that Muhammad had chosen Abu Bakr as his successor.

Theophanes arranged his material by years, identifying them in a variety of ways, including the regnal years of the most important rulers and bishops, but also the *annus mundi* (year of the world or AM), which was calculated in Alexandria on the basis of the belief that the world was created in 5492 BC. (Nonetheless, in the passage below, Theophanes dates the death of Muhammad to AD 629/30 when, in fact, he died in 632).

In this year died Mouamed [Muhammad], the leader and false prophet of the Saracens, after

appointing his kinsman Aboubacharos [Abu Bakr] <to his chieftainship. At the same time his repute spread abroad> and everyone was frightened. At the beginning of his advent the misguided Jews thought he was the Messiah who is awaited by them, so that some of their leaders joined him and accepted his religion while forsaking that of Moses, who saw God. Those who did so were ten in number, and they remained with him until his murder. But when they saw him eating camel meat, they realized that he was not the one they thought him to be, and were at a loss what to do; being afraid to abjure his religion, those wretched men taught him illicit things directed against us, Christians, and remained with him.

I consider it necessary to give an account of this man's origin. He was descended from a very widespread tribe, that of Ishmael, son of Abraham; for Nizaros, descendant of Ishmael, is recognized as the father of them all. He begot two sons, Moudaros and Raias. Moudaros begot Kourasos, Kaisos, Themimes, Asados, and others unknown. All of them dwelt in the Midianite desert and kept cattle, themselves living in tents. There are also those farther away who are not of their tribe, but of that of Iektan, the so-called Amanites, that is Homerites. And some of them traded on their camels. Being destitute and an orphan, the aforesaid Mouamed decided to enter the service of a rich woman who was a relative of his, called Chadiga [Kadij'a], as a hired worker with a view to trading by camel in Egypt and Palestine. Little by little he became bolder and ingratiated himself with that woman, who was a widow, took her as a wife, and gained possession of her camels and her substance. Whenever he came to Palestine he consorted with Jews and Christians and sought from them certain scriptural matters. He was also afflicted with epilepsy. When his wife became aware of this, she was greatly distressed, inasmuch as she, a noblewoman, had married a man such as he, who was not only poor, but also an epileptic. He tried deceitfully to placate her by saying, "I keep seeing a vision of a certain angel called Gabriel, and being unable to bear his sight, I faint and fall down." Now, she had a certain monk living there, a friend of hers (who had been exiled for his depraved doctrine), and she related everything to him, including the angel's name. Wishing to satisfy her, he said to her, "He has spoken the truth, for this is the angel who is sent to all the prophets." When she had heard the words of the false monk, she was the first to believe in Mouamed and proclaimed to other women of her tribe that he was a prophet. Thus, the report spread from women to men, and first to Aboubacharos [Abu Bakr], whom he left as his successor. This heresy prevailed in the region of Ethribos, in the last resort by war: at first secretly, for ten years, and by war another ten, and openly nine. He taught his subjects that he who kills an enemy or is killed by an enemy goes to Paradise; and he said that this paradise was one of carnal eating and drinking and intercourse with women, and had a river of wine, honey, and milk, and that the women were not like the ones down here, but different ones, and the pleasure continuous; and other things full of profligacy and stupidity; also that men should feel sympathy for one another and help those who are wronged. (Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, trans., *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 464–5)

out against the Arab army, but they too were forced to surrender to 'Umar in 638. The caliph respected the Christian places of worship in Jerusalem and left them in Christian hands, although Muslim shrines were quickly built in the holy city. The Arabs subdued the Persian Empire as quickly as they had taken the Byzantine East, and they moved to conquer Armenia in 640 and Alexandria (Egypt) in 641 (Map 9.1).

The caliph 'Umar began the process of creating a state, which would ultimately have its capital at Damascus, in former Byzantine territory, and in

doing so he made use of many Byzantine institutions and, indeed, former Byzantine officials, since the Arabs had no previous tradition of managing a large centralized but diverse empire. In fact, the records of the caliphate were for years kept in Greek, and the earliest Arab coinage imitated Byzantine coins, even so far as depicting a standing caliph in imitation of coins showing the emperor in the same pose; only after some time was this human figure removed from the

### **Box 7.5 The Fall of Jerusalem to the Arabs: The Nobility of 'Umar and the Patriarch Sophronios**

Beginning in 634, the Arabs quickly swept over the whole of the Near East, bringing both the old Persian Empire and all the Byzantine East under their sway. Practically the only place where the Byzantines were able to offer resistance was the holy city of Jerusalem, where the fiery and powerful bishop, Sophronios, was able to hold out against the attack of the caliph 'Umar. Finally, without the likelihood of support from Byzantine troops, Sophronios surrendered the city, taking advantage of the precept of Islam that a place that surrendered voluntarily to a Muslim power would not be subject to rape and pillage.

The passage that follows, from Theophanes, describes how the transfer of power took place and how caliph and patriarch sought to outdo each other in maintaining their dignity and superiority. Notice also the bias evident in Theophanes and the way in which the patriarch apparently saw the fall of the city in apocalyptic terms: it was a sign that the world was coming to an end.

In this year [634/5] Oumaros ['Umar, the third Muslim caliph] invaded Palestine and, after investing the Holy City for two years, took it by capitulation; for Sophronios, the bishop of Jerusalem, received a promise of immunity of the whole of Palestine. Oumaros entered the Holy City dressed in filthy garments of camel-hair and, showing a devilish pretence, sought the Temple of the Jews – the one built by Solomon – that he might make it a place of worship for his own blasphemous religion. Seeing this, Sophronios said, “Verily, this is the abomination of desolation standing in a holy place, as has been spoken through the prophet Daniel” [Daniel 11:32; see also Matthew 24:15, Mark 13:14]. And with many tears the defender of piety bewailed the Christian people. While Oumaros was there, the patriarch begged him to receive from him a kerchief and a garment to put on, but he would not suffer to wear them. At length, he persuaded to put them on until his clothes were washed, and then he returned them to Sophronios and put on his own. (Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, trans., *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 471–2)

coins, to be replaced by a simple inscription. The same can be said about monumental architecture, since the Arabs had little or no tradition in this regard, and the new rulers naturally employed Byzantine architects and builders in the construction of palaces, mosques, and other public buildings to decorate their cities and places of private retreat. Good examples of the continuity of the Byzantine tradition under the early caliphs are the great mosque in Damascus,

the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and the Ummayad palaces in the Jordanian desert.

There is also good evidence of continuity on a more basic level in the archaeological evidence. Close examination of excavations and surveys from both the city and the countryside suggest considerable prosperity in Syria through the fourth to the sixth centuries. This much is in keeping with what we know from throughout the eastern Mediterranean in this period. Excavations at the village of Dehès, however, present a considerable surprise. The apparent prosperity of earlier years allowed the inhabitants, who were apparently farmers, to build quite impressive houses (complete with colonnades along the front) through the sixth century. This construction came to a halt but the Arab conquests left virtually no trace, and life apparently continued without a break at least to the end of the seventh century. There is no evidence of violent destruction at any point, but the settlement seems to have shrunk in size and eventually disappeared, apparently as a result of the rise of the Abassids and the replacement of Damascus by Baghdad as the seat of the caliphate in 750, events that had no direct connection with Byzantium.

The Arabs, thus, did not come as destroyers; in general they respected and admired the culture and the accomplishments of Byzantium (and, equally, of Persia), and they built their own Islamic culture in significant ways on this base. It is often pointed out that the Arabs made use of the writings and ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers, mathematicians, and scientists, and they played a significant role in the transmission of that knowledge to the medieval West (in the twelfth century). What is not always recognized is that to the Arabs these works were “Byzantine,” and they borrowed the books from Byzantine libraries, where the manuscripts had been preserved and copied, and translated them into Arabic as an important foundation for their own science and culture.

The reasons for the remarkable expansion of Islam have long been discussed by historians, and many theories have been put forward. The historical discussion is especially difficult because both the Arab and the Byzantine sources are hard to interpret, since they each view the events through the lens of evolving religious traditions. In fact, some recent studies have even argued that Islam emerged only slowly from the Judeo-Christian tradition and that Muhammad’s original mission may have been very different from what is pictured in the traditional sources. In general, it is probably useful to distinguish between those factors which weakened the Byzantines (and the Persians) and those which strengthened the Arabs or made them want to leave the Arabian

peninsula. In the past, western historians often said that the conquests arose out of the religious zeal of the Arabs, who, because they were fanatical Muslims, were all willing to die for the spread of Islam in a holy war (*jihad*). This is highly questionable for a variety of reasons, not least because it is not clearly indicated in the sources.

On the one hand, it is likely that the earliest attacks on Byzantine and Persian territory were simple *razzias*, traditional Arab raids. The *razzia* had for centuries been part of the economic basis of Arabia, and one should remember that large numbers of Arabs had long been settled along the eastern frontier of Byzantium. Many of the Arabs had previously come to abandon their nomadic life in the desert in favor of a sedentary agricultural existence, frequently within the boundaries of the empire. Byzantium had, likewise, long made use of various Arab allies to guard the frontier, and the earliest Islamic attacks presumably fell most heavily on the other Arabs, who had made their peace with the Byzantine Empire and who were therefore most seriously disturbed by the sudden attacks.

Furthermore, the new religion of Islam forbade Muslims from making armed attacks on other Muslims, even though there had been a long tradition of such raids as a “way of life” in the Arabian peninsula. Prevented from carrying out such attacks on fellow Muslims, the newly converted Arabs naturally turned their attention to non-Muslims.

When the new *razzias* fell upon Persian and Byzantine territories, they encountered little opposition. As already mentioned, the long war between Persia and Byzantium (from about 602 to 628) had exhausted both sides and they were ill prepared for a new war with an enemy who came quickly, apparently out of nowhere. Many of the most productive areas of both states had previously been overrun and burned during the course of the war, and time had not allowed the recovery of their productive capabilities. In this regard the psychological strain of the Arab attacks, so soon after the great war with Persia, must not be discounted.

Historians have often pointed to the weakness caused by the religious split between the Orthodox and the Monophysites, and the dissatisfaction of the latter, as a factor in the Arab success. While this may have been the case, it is difficult at this remove to know how much stock to put in that explanation, especially since there is little evidence that the Monophysites actively assisted the Arabs in any significant way.

Some scholars have argued that the Arabian peninsula was progressively drying up during this period, forcing the Arabs to move into the surrounding

territories, driving them, in fact, into territories controlled by Christianized, sedentary Arabs, who in the end came to join the movement into the Byzantine interior. In addition, as we have seen, various scholars are now arguing that the Byzantine world suffered a significant crisis from the middle of the sixth century, as a result of plague and perhaps the overspending of Justinian, and that it was in serious decline already, well before the appearance of the Arabs. Nevertheless, despite the violent shock of the Arab conquests for the Byzantine state, there is reason to believe that life in the cities of the East did not actually change much – at least initially – after the conquest. Thus, archaeological evidence now seems to show that many of the great cities continued to thrive after the Arab conquest and that the economy, at least that of the areas along the coast of the Mediterranean, did not change drastically in the immediate aftermath of the conquest.

## The Successors of Herakleios

Herakleios spent his last years sunk in despair, illness, and perhaps even mental disarray. The utter collapse of the East left him unable to act, and the man who had taken the state from defeat to triumph was apparently petrified by indecision and fear. Dissension began to arise in the capital and Herakleios finally died in February of 641.

He left his successors a difficult legacy: the empire was divided internally and had to face a series of challenges from the ascendant Arab caliphate. That the Byzantine state was able to survive this time of troubles is a measure of its deep internal strength and the creation of an institutional structure that would characterize Byzantine society for the next half-millennium. The period is a difficult one to understand, in part because our sources are so poor, but events of crucial importance were taking place. The ultimate failures of the Arabs to take Constantinople and to make permanent inroads in Asia Minor were the beginnings of the long process of Byzantine recovery.

Herakleios had been married twice, first to Favia, who took the name Eudokia, and who bore him the future emperor Herakleios Constantine, also known as Constantine III. After her death Herakleios married his niece Martina (in 613/14), a capable and ambitious woman who earned the enmity of the people and the church, in part because the marriage was generally considered to be incestuous. The patriarch Sergios condemned the union, but Herakleios ignored his opposition and Martina bore the emperor as many as ten children; several of

these, however, were mentally incapacitated – a sign to some of God's displeasure.

Herakleios Constantine had been born in 612 and crowned as emperor the next year, so his succession was assured, even though he was in ill health at the time of Herakleios' death. According to the former emperor's will, Herakleios Constantine was to share the throne with his half-brother Heraklonas, the son of Martina, who was only 15 at the time. Herakleios Constantine was popular with the people of Constantinople, but he found the treasury empty (according to one report, he had the tomb of his father opened and his crown removed to be sold!) and he had no military success. Martina clearly found him an impediment to the rule of her own son, and rumors of foul play immediately circulated when Herakleios Constantine died within a few months of his accession.

Martina now felt that she had a clear opportunity to rule in the name of her young son. She supported the teachings of Monotheletism and sought to remove the followers of the recently deceased co-emperor, but opposition arose, both because of her supposedly incestuous marriage and also simply because she was a woman who sought to rule on her own. This opposition was centered especially within the Senate and the army in Asia Minor, and Martina tried to diffuse it by organizing the coronation of Herakleios Constantine's son, Konstans II, who was only 11 years old. This was not enough, however, and a revolt swept her and her son from power. Both were mutilated – the first case of judicial mutilation of an emperor or empress: Heraklonas' nose and Martina's tongue were slit, rendering them incapable of again holding imperial power, and they were exiled to the island of Rhodes in September 641.

The real name of Konstans II (641–68) was Flavios Herakleios, but he was crowned as Constantine and he used that name on his coins. The new emperor, probably because of his youth, was universally known by the nickname of Konstans. During the early part of his reign the Senate exercised unusual power, but by the time he was 18 or so he ruled in his own name and began to take the field himself in command of his troops.

Naturally the first concern of the emperor was the Arab threat, and Konstans devised an aggressive policy, urging his soldiers on with remembrance of the victories of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. Unfortunately for the emperor, the Arabs were increasingly better organized, and in Muawiya, the governor of Syria and then first Umayyad caliph (661–80), they had a leader who devised a carefully thought-out plan to attack the Byzantine Empire. In 647 he began to make annual raids into Asia Minor. Muawiya was tolerant of

Christians and he made use of Byzantine administrators and craftsmen, most notably to help in the construction of a fleet with which he sought to challenge Byzantine naval superiority and strike deep into the heart of the empire. Thus, Muawiya captured Cyprus (649), Rhodes (654), and Kos (654), challenging the Byzantines for control of the southern coast of Asia Minor. Interestingly enough, the Arabs were not able to hold Cyprus, and from this time until the middle of the tenth century Cyprus remained a condominium in which both Arabs and the Byzantine officials exercised authority and from which neither power was supposed to launch an attack on the other. This interesting arrangement was probably not unique in this period and indicates the ability of Byzantines and Arabs to interact in a less than hostile way.

Konstans II recognized the danger posed by Muawiya's success at sea, since it meant that the Byzantine heartland of Asia Minor was being caught in the pincers of a double threat from the Arabs: attacks by land and a surrounding movement to the south by sea. The emperor organized and personally commanded a fleet that set off to challenge the Arab navy, and the two powers met at the "Battle of the Masts" at Phoenix (modern Finike) in Lycia, off the southern coast of Asia Minor, in 655 (Map 9.1). The Arabs won a total victory and Konstans barely escaped with his life, disguising himself as an ordinary seaman.

Muawiya, however, was soon preoccupied by internal political events. The latter years of the caliphate of Uthman were marked by civil strife, and the caliph was murdered in 657. Uthman was succeeded by Ali, the nephew of the Prophet and husband of Fatima, Muhammad's daughter. Discontent continued, however, and Muawiya (who had been secretary of the Prophet) was one of Ali's leading opponents. As a result of this struggle Muawiya concluded a peace treaty with Konstans in 659, in which Byzantium was to pay a huge tribute.

Freed temporarily from the Arab threat, Konstans was able to turn his attention to pressing military considerations elsewhere. Indeed, the policy of Konstans II is one of the best indications that the Byzantines had never acknowledged the loss of Italy and the West; the emperor planned to move his residence to Syracuse in Sicily. In addition, taking advantage of the respite in the East (as early as 658), Konstans made a show of strength in "Sklavenia," as the Balkans were then known. This was the first action against the Slavs in 50 years, and shows that Byzantine force of arms, if properly organized and led, was capable of a reconquest of the Balkans. In addition, Konstans began a policy of moving Slavic prisoners to Asia Minor, a practice that was continued by many of his

successors in the years to come. Konstans led his army through Greece, spending the winter of 662/3 in Athens. The imperial party moved on to Rome and finally to Syracuse, where the emperor took up residence. Konstans had many enemies, however, and had to face a number of rebellions. His fiscal policies led to considerable opposition in Italy, and his move to the West caused further discontent, especially when Muawiya secured the caliphate in 661 and was able to resume his attacks on Byzantine territory. Konstans was murdered in his bath in 668, the victim of a palace coup.

In his religious policy Konstans attempted compromise, but he was unwilling to tolerate any opposition. His desire to strengthen Byzantine power in Italy required the acquiescence of the papacy, and this led to the removal of the *Ekthesis* of Herakleios. His policy was outlined in a statement the emperor signed in 648, called the *Typos*; this did not specifically condemn Monotheletism, but it ordered the removal of the *Ekthesis* from Hagia Sophia and essentially harked back to the *Henotikon* of Zeno, forbidding any discussion of the religious controversy. Of course, this did not solve the problem, and Pope Martin I quickly became involved in the controversy. Before becoming pope, Martin had been a papal emissary in Constantinople, where he supported Maximos the Confessor in his struggle against Monotheletism, and in 649 he called a council in Rome (the Lateran Council) which condemned the *Typos* and excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople for his support of it. This resistance to imperial policy naturally infuriated Konstans, and the controversy quickly escalated. Konstans took the unusual step of ordering Olympios, the exarch of Ravenna, to arrest the pope for treason. Olympios, however, came to an understanding with Martin and ultimately proclaimed himself as emperor. Konstans dispatched a new exarch to Rome, and in 653 he had the pope arrested and brought to Constantinople, where he was tried for treason. The pope tried to turn the trial into a forum for discussion of the *Typos*, but this was not allowed and he was condemned to death; the sentence was commuted, however, and Martin was exiled to Cherson, where he died in 655. Maximos the Confessor supported the pope and condemned the actions of Konstans. As a result, he too was brought to Constantinople, condemned for treason in 655 and exiled, first to Thrace and later to Lazika in the Caucasus, where he died in 662. The opponents of imperial religious policy had been condemned, but they had not been silenced, and Maximos, in particular, continued to write widely in opposition to the intervention of the state in doctrinal matters. In the end, Konstans was able to enforce his will on the church, but Pope Martin and Maximos the Confessor

were powerful spokesmen for the independence of the church in the face of what they considered tyrannical imperial behavior. Their example was to play a large role in a controversy that erupted half a century later.

## Constantine IV (668–685)

After some initial hesitation Constantine IV, the son of Konstans II, succeeded to the throne. He had been crowned as co-emperor in 654, and he ruled at first with his younger brothers Herakleios and Tiberios. His first act was to go to Sicily to put down the revolt of Mezizios, one of the murderers of his father, but he soon had serious difficulties to deal with on the eastern frontier.

By 668 the dispute within the caliphate had ended, and Muawiya was in firm control. Beginning in 663, the Arabs invaded Asia Minor every year and ravaged it, but each autumn they had to return to their bases in Syria. Muawiya understood that as long as Constantinople remained an impregnable fortress the Arabs would not be able to secure their victories in Asia Minor, and he continued his policy of naval encirclement. In 670 his troops took Kyzikos, on the shores of the Sea of Marmora opposite Constantinople, and in 670 Smyrna. In 674 Muawiya initiated a great siege of Constantinople itself. The siege was based on initial Arab superiority at sea, since the Land Walls of the city were essentially impregnable. The siege dragged on for four years, but the tide finally turned when Byzantine ships sailed out of the Golden Horn and engaged the Arab ships with “Greek Fire” for the first time. This substance, the manufacture of which was a Byzantine state secret not precisely known even today, was shot through a siphon and ignited a supposedly unquenchable conflagration. Scholars have proposed various substances as its base, from gunpowder to a petroleum-based mixture; its effect was apparently terrifying and effective for the Byzantine defenders. Although Greek Fire could be used in a variety of circumstances, it was most commonly employed in naval encounters, shot from the decks of Byzantine ships onto the wooden hulls of their opponents.

In the end, the forces of Muawiya had to withdraw (678); although the Arabs were again to threaten Constantinople, this was the high-water mark of Arab power against Byzantium, and from this point on the Byzantines began to recover, certainly in part because of the slow reorganization of the state and the army that was taking place during this period. Muawiya realized that the immediate opportunity had been lost, and he signed a 30-year peace treaty on terms that were far more favorable to Byzantium than those agreed upon earlier

in the century. Thus, in broad historical terms, the siege of Constantinople in 674–8 was of considerable importance, and some rank it as more significant than the Battle of Tours (or Poitiers) in 732, when the forces of Charles Martel defeated the Arabs of Spain. The Byzantine victory in 678 was the first significant defeat that the Arabs had experienced since their explosion onto the world scene 40 years earlier, and it has been seen by some as critical in the defense of Europe and European civilization. Such a view is largely out of historical fashion, and it is more common for historians to stress the strong interconnections between the Arabs and the Christian powers of early medieval Europe, but there is no question that the Byzantine victory at this point was significant in the survival of the empire itself.

**Figure 7.2** Qasr Amra, probably the best known of the so-called Desert Castles in Jordan. These structures were built in the late seventh and early eighth century along the desert fringe of what is now eastern Jordan. The buildings, all of which show direct connection with Byzantine architecture, were apparently used by the early Umayyads, including the caliph himself, as retreats for hunting and pleasure. They were not infrequently decorated with frescoes containing human representations and hunting scenes. Qasr Amra may have been built by the caliph al-Walid and had a Roman-style bath and a unique depiction of the evening sky painted on the round surface of the interior of a dome. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



Constantine IV also attempted further to stabilize the situation in the West. He signed a peace treaty with the Lombards, who had made headway in southern

Italy, capturing several Byzantine strongholds. He was less successful in the Balkans, and he was forced to recognize the settlement of the Bulgars south of the Danube.

In religious affairs, Constantine followed the lead of his predecessors in attempting to put an end to the religious disputes. He summoned the sixth ecumenical council at Constantinople in 680 to deal with the lingering issue of Monotheletism. By this time, however, most of the Monophysite churches of the East had been lost to the empire, and there was little reason to pursue the seemingly futile quest for compromise. As a result the council decreed that, in keeping with the teachings of Chalcedon, Christ has two “wills” and two “energies” (although these were inseparably united). It condemned Monotheletism and anathematized those who had supported it, including one pope and several bishops of Constantinople; the memories of those who had opposed Monotheletism, including Maximos the Confessor, Sophronios of Jerusalem, and Pope Martin I, were all vindicated.

## Box 7.6 The Miracles of St. Artemios

According to tradition, Artemios was an Arian imperial official in the fourth century, who persecuted pagans and Orthodox Christians. According to the church historian Philostorgios, he was executed by the emperor Julian the Apostate and his body was brought to Constantinople and deposited in the church of St. John Prodromos (the Forerunner, usually known as the Baptist in the West). There the saint began to perform healing miracles and attracted many people – mostly men who had problems with their reproductive organs.

In the 660s an anonymous author composed a series of apparently eyewitness accounts of these miracles, which were probably read to the afflicted patients as they stayed in the church waiting for the saint to appear and heal them. These stories convey a sense of immediacy and show how the saints were thought to intervene to solve pressing problems of life and death, pain and suffering. They also show that the ancient practice of *incubation* continued in Byzantium. In pagan antiquity the patients slept in a special part of the sanctuary in preparation for the appearance of the god (usually Asklepios), who would heal them. Much the same took place at the church of the Forerunner in Constantinople in the seventh century.

### Miracle 1.

A certain chief physician, Anthimos by name, had a son about 20 years old whose testicles had become dangerously diseased so that he did not even have the strength to go to the latrines by himself. The father brought him on a litter to the church of the Forerunner where the much-revered relic of the holy and glorious Artemios now lies, and he did whatever all are accustomed to do who are similarly afflicted. Then one night the holy martyr appeared to him in a dream in the semblance of his father Anthimos and said to him: “Let me see what it is that you have.” And Anthimos’ son, after undressing himself, showed him; once he had done this, Artemios took hold of his testicles and squeezed them forcefully so that he awoke and cried out in pain, still in the grip of the frightening dream. Anxious and worried that the illness was growing worse and after touching the

afflicted place, he found himself without pain and his testicles restored to health.

### **Miracle 7.**

A certain young man, Plato by name, confident in his youth and, as the young are fond of doing, making a contest over the calibre of his strength, engaged in a wager to lift up the stone of a wooddealer's scales and to set it on his shoulder. After the size of the wager had been set, he picked up the stone and, as he was struggling to set it on his shoulder, all his intestines ruptured in a hernia so that the spectators were astounded by the sight. Now some good men counseled him saying: "Do not entrust yourself to a doctor but go to St. John's in the Oxeia and approach St. Artemios and he himself will cure you. For every day he works miracles in these cases." So after being lifted up by some of them, he was transported by litter, as he was at risk over his life. While waiting a few days and suffering in unbearable pain, he saw St. Artemios in a dream who said to him: "And so, why are you so fond of wagers? See, you have plotted against both your soul and body." And he exhorted him never more to make a wager and, saying these things, he trod on his stomach. The contender awoke from sleep and was relieved of his pain along with his injury. Thanking God and the martyr for this turn of events, he departed for home rejoicing. Whoever had learned of his misfortune, seeing him restored to health, glorified God Who had sped His mercy upon him. (Virgil S. Crisafulli and John W. Nesbitt, *The Miracles of St. Artemios: A Collection of Miracle Stories by an Anonymous Author of Seventh-Century Byzantium* (Leiden, 1997), pp. 79, 91)

The reigns of Konstans II and Constantine IV were critical in providing a basis for the military stability that was to come in subsequent decades. The great test with the Arabs was still to come, but through organizational change and the maintenance of naval power (especially along a series of island bases, from Constantinople, through the Aegean, and to the West and Italy), a foundation for Byzantine revival was in the making. The written sources do not allow much precision in our understanding of this period, but archaeological evidence, the study of the lead seals of *kommerkiarioi*, and the implementation of new military technology (such as Greek Fire) were important in rehabilitating Byzantine power.

## **Justinian II, First Reign (685–695)**

Constantine IV died in 685 and was survived by his wife Anastasia and their two sons, Justinian and Herakleios. Justinian II was only about 16 years of age when his father died, but his elevation was apparently unquestioned. Despite his youth Justinian embarked on a broad and aggressive policy on a number of fronts. Militarily his armies were generally successful against the Arabs early in his reign, although Arab raids deep into Asia Minor forced him to pull back from Armenia and other areas, where he had been able to re-exert Byzantine power. These victories allowed Justinian to campaign with some success in the Balkans,

and he continued the policy of population exchange, settling Slavs in Asia Minor and eastern peoples in the Balkans.

Likewise, following the footsteps of his father in religious affairs, he confirmed the condemnation of Monotheletism. In 691–2 he called the Quinisextum Council (Council in Trullo), held in the imperial palace in Constantinople. This council, unlike those that had immediately preceded it, was not primarily concerned with theological controversy, but with the everyday affairs of morality and the governing of the church. The decrees of this council survive and they provide an important window into life in this period, not just for the church and members of the clergy, but also for ordinary laypeople.

**Figure 7.3** Gold coin of Justinian II, first reign (692–5). The coin is the first to depict Christ as the main image. The legend on the obverse (front) of the coin reads (in Latin) “Jesus Christ, King of those who rule” and, on the reverse, “Lord Justinian, the servant of Christ.” Christ is depicted with long hair and beard, a representation that became standard in later centuries. Justinian is shown standing, wearing a jeweled garment called a *loros* and he is holding a long cross. Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Thomas Whittemore. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College.



Justinian II was extremely pious and he carried out many notable building and iconographic programs, including construction of the Triklinos in the imperial palace. Especially significant was Justinian’s decision to use a portrait of Christ as the main element on Byzantine gold coins. Previous to this, for one reason or another, the Byzantines had been hesitant to place the figure of Christ directly on the coins, but Justinian reversed this policy and relegated his own portrait to the reverse of the coin, a clear indication of the triumph of the Eusebian ideal of the Byzantine monarchy: Christ was the real ruler, while the emperor was his vice-regent and confidant.

## **Weak Emperors and Near Anarchy (695–717)**

Despite Justinian II's success, opposition began to mount, especially to his stringent taxation policies. In 695 a revolt broke out, led by the emperor's most successful general, Leontios, an Isaurian who had fallen out of Justinian's favor. The revolt succeeded and Leontios became emperor. Justinian was mutilated by having his nose cut off; from this time he was known as "Rhinotmetos" (Slit-Nose) and he may have worn a gold replacement to hide his disfigurement. The former emperor was exiled to Cherson, on the northern shore of the Black Sea.

Leontios (695–8) ruled only briefly, his reign marked most notably by an outbreak of plague. Leontios dispatched the naval commander Apsimar to North Africa in an attempt to recover that area from the Arabs. The endeavor failed but Apsimar was proclaimed emperor, and he captured Constantinople with the aid of the Green faction, and was proclaimed emperor with the name Tiberios II (698–705). Tiberios was active in promoting the defense of the empire, repairing the Sea Walls of Constantinople, and he intervened militarily in Cyprus and Syria.

Justinian II, however, while exiled in Cherson, had allied himself with the khan of the Khazars, whose sister he married. The Khazars had been established in the Caucasus and north of the Black Sea at least since the time of Herakleios, and they were natural allies of the Byzantines against the Persians and, later, against the Arabs. In addition, they provided the Byzantines with important assistance in controlling the western end of the steppe corridor, leading from Central Asia to the Danube frontier, always a key area in Byzantine foreign policy.

With the Khazars' help Justinian returned to Constantinople and again seized the throne (705–11). Justinian II was one of only a very few Byzantine rulers to regain the throne, and the only emperor who reigned after having been mutilated. Justinian had his wife Theodora crowned as empress, the first foreign-born woman to hold that honor. During his second reign Justinian II picked up where he had left off, re-establishing a coinage decorated with the bust of Christ and promoting an ambitious foreign policy involving the Lombards, the papacy, and the Bulgars in the West, while the Arabs under Maslama invaded Asia Minor. Justinian dispatched a fleet against Cherson, but the troops revolted and proclaimed their commander Bardanes emperor with the name Philippikos. Aided by the Khazars, Philippikos captured Constantinople in 711 and Justinian II fled the city.

Surprisingly enough, Philippikos again raised the issue of Monotheletism and called a church council which reversed the decisions recently taken in this regard. Philippikos' reign was militarily unsuccessful and the Arabs had a series of striking victories. Probably for this reason, there was another military revolt and in 713 Philippikos was deposed and blinded.

The court official Artemios was proclaimed emperor as Anastasios II (713–15). He immediately reversed the religious policy of his predecessor, reinstated the councils that Philippikos had condemned, and in 715 made Germanos patriarch of Constantinople; Germanos, who was an important theologian and author of religious poetry, would play a significant role in the controversies that were soon to break out. Anastasios correctly believed that the Arabs were planning another great attack on Constantinople, and he prepared the city for the siege by strengthening the walls and building up a strong supply of provisions. Nevertheless, yet another military revolt spelled the end of Anastasios II and brought Theodosios III to the throne (715–17). The new emperor may well have been the son of Tiberios II, spared by Justinian II upon his return to power in 705. Theodosios was also aware of the imminent Arab danger, and he signed an alliance with the Bulgar khan Tervel, probably to secure his rear in the event of an Arab siege. Yet another military revolt broke out, however, and with the rise of Leo III, Theodosios abdicated and became a monk.

**Figure 7.4** Gold coin of Justinian II, second reign (705–11). The figure of Christ disappeared from the coinage after Justinian II's overthrow and mutilation in 692. When he recovered the throne in 705, however, the bust of Christ returned to the obverse of the gold coinage. This time Christ was pictured in a very different way: he is young, beardless, and with short curly hair. The reverse shows Justinian along with his young son Tiberios, each of whom is holding on to a long cross. Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Thomas Whittemore. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College.



## **Social and Economic Changes**

The period we have just examined witnessed significant transformations in society, in many ways that had begun in the preceding period of the time after Constantine but that speeded up and led to dramatic change in the period under consideration. We have already mentioned the severe plague that first struck the empire in the reign of Justinian (541/2) and that recurred periodically until the eighth century. This had devastating results, including a population decrease of perhaps as much as 30 percent. Invasions, costly wars, and a probable climatic change (to a long period of colder, drier winters) exacerbated the difficulties and led to the decline or even the abandonment of many cities. All of this had far-reaching repercussions, including the breakdown of many social structures and the apparent emergence of the family as the main building block of society (as opposed to the city or larger social groups). In addition, many of the primary institutions of society collapsed or withered to but a shadow of their former selves. Among these were education, longdistance trade, a monetary economy, and public works. None of these institutions, we should insist, disappeared completely within the Byzantine Empire during this period, but their decline had significant ramifications that must have been felt in most aspects of life. The collapse of public education must have had an enormous impact on the functioning of the central state, since the bureaucracy in Constantinople relied on trained lawyers, accountants, minor officials, and diplomats. Roads must have deteriorated, fortifications crumbled, and the construction of churches seems almost to have ceased in this period, while the loss of mines and the destruction of farmland must have caused significant damage to the broader economy, and to the ability of the state to collect taxes and to maintain a monetarized economy. In this context, although Constantinople never lost its central importance, the focus of society became more and more localized. Large cities became small towns or fortified refuges; the local bishop increased his power as arbiter, often as the wealthiest and most powerful citizen, and the representative of both God and the emperor alike. As we have seen, the early Byzantine Empire was not apparently characterized by the same wide social and economic gulf between the aristocracy and the ordinary citizens that could be seen in the contemporary West. Nonetheless, in the crisis of the sixth and seventh centuries there seems to have been even more of a leveling, as overall well-being must have declined dramatically and many of the Byzantine aristocrats lost their properties and wealth, bringing them closer to the level of the peasants and soldiers who

continued to live on the land. In this context, trade and the use of money did not cease altogether, although both seem to have declined precipitously.

## The *Theme* System and Administrative Reorganization

During the latter part of the seventh century important changes also took place in the administrative structure of the Byzantine Empire. Essentially these involved the replacement of the system of many small provinces, characteristic of the period since the time of Diocletian, with a number of larger units called *themes* (*themata*). By the end of the seventh century four *themes* apparently existed in Asia Minor: the Opsikion, Anatolikon, Armeniakon, and Thrakesion, while the Karabiasiani was a naval theme with its center in the islands of the Aegean and the southern coast of Asia Minor. It is clear that the *themes* were essentially military districts, or the regions where specific troops were stationed, since they were governed by a *strategos* (general) or another military official, all of whom had both military and civilian power, and the names of the earliest themes also seem to have been derived from known military units. Probably in the context of the collapse of the frontiers in the seventh century, the military regiments were withdrawn into the interior of Asia Minor and their commanders provided what law and order could be maintained.

There has been considerable disagreement among historians about the date of the creation of the *theme* system, what it included, and the nature of its implementation. The reason for this is the paucity of the sources, the fact that many of them were written well after the events, and the sparse information they provide. As mentioned above, some scholars, such as George Ostrogorsky, thought that the system had been created as an act of policy by Herakleios, but most scholars today think it developed later and more gradually, probably more as a natural response to military collapse in the face of Arab successes than as a deliberate imperial decision. Warren Treadgold has probably won the most support for his argument that the earliest themes were created by Konstans II around 660, while John Haldon chose to see the beginning of the development in the years after his death in 668. In any case, it seems clear that this transformation was a slow one and that it took considerable time for the new system to become widespread. As mentioned, the first themes were located in Asia Minor and the system spread to the Balkans only slowly.

**Map 7.2 Themes in the seventh century** (after A. Kazhdan et al., eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York, 1991), p. 2034)



In a period of military crisis the theme system provided the commanders (especially the generals, or *strategoi*) with considerable power and the ability to take military action without waiting for orders from Constantinople. As such, the system was an ideal response to the raids and campaigns of the Arabs in Asia Minor. The thematic army was local and relatively small; it could act quickly and easily to attack invaders from unexpected positions. Over time, and as the original military crisis subsided, the larger themes tended to be subdivided into small territories, and new themes were organized in reconquered territories, first in Greece (the theme of Hellas) and then in more remote areas of the empire. Thus, in the end the power of the *strategos* might become a threat to the central authority in Constantinople, overall the military system of the *themes* was one of the most significant reasons for the survival of the Byzantine empire in the difficulties of the late seventh and eighth centuries.

Perhaps at the same time, state officials called *kommerkiarioi* began to provide some of the basics of state economic control, possibly even including the collection of taxes, in the far-flung areas that remained loyal to the empire. These officials, who seem originally to have controlled the silk trade, came to represent imperial authority on islands and other remote areas and provided a

modicum of economic stability and support for the governors of the themes.

Most scholars have also connected the rise of the theme system with the institution of the *stratiotika ktemata* (soldiers' lands). In this system the state granted lands that had been abandoned (presumably vacated by their aristocratic owners at the time of the Arab raids in Asia Minor) to soldiers who, in turn, agreed to arm themselves, provide horses for combat, and appear for military service. Although this system may seem to resemble the western institution of feudalism, it is actually quite different, in part because the state still maintained the right to govern all its territory as a political entity and in part because the farmer/soldiers were not a semi-independent nobility, but simply soldiers who served the empire in return for the use of state-owned land. Ostrogorsky also saw the *stratiotika ktemata* as the basis for a system of villages inhabited by independent farmers. And this, he argued, was the backbone of the Byzantine society and economy from the seventh century onward. Indeed, Ostrogorsky saw the crises of the period, including the Arabic and Slavic invasions, as an essentially positive force, wiping away virtually all trace of large-scale aristocratic landownership and paving the way for a direct alliance between the emperors and the peasants. Although many of the details of Ostrogorsky's reconstruction are probably not valid, the basic view of a countryside populated by independent farmers who owned or managed their own land seems correct.

The best evidence for these villages is the so-called Farmer's Law, which was probably issued in the later seventh or early eighth century, perhaps even under Justinian II. This law focuses mainly on cattle-raising and the production of various kinds of crops and it makes no mention of large estates, but rather seems to focus on villages of farmers who own their own land and hold a small portion of land in common for the community as a whole.

The emergence of the theme system also meant some changes in the system of administration at the very highest level, in large part because there was no longer any need for the praetorian prefect to coordinate activities among the various provinces; nor was there any longer a place for the *magistri militum* or the other highly placed military commanders of an earlier period. To be sure, from the seventh century onward a single commander often led the main field army when the emperor did not take the field himself, but the *strategoi* of the various *themata* (especially in the early years) commonly served as the main military advisers of the emperor and they personally led their local troops into battle.

Within the central bureaucracy, the major tasks of government fell to the accountants and secretaries who had previously served underlings of the

praetorian prefects, the so-called *logothetes*. The *logothetes* served at the will of the emperor, but a certain hierarchy and division of authority tended to develop:

The logothete of military affairs (*logothetes tou stratiotikou*) was in charge of spending for military matters, including armaments and supplies.

The logothete of the general account (*logothetes tou genikou*) was responsible for most of the taxes of the empire, including the land tax.

The logothete of the dromos (*logothetes tou dromou*) was originally in charge of the public post, including the dispatch and receipt of imperial orders; in time he took on the task of protection of the emperor, imperial ceremony, and, most importantly, the overall management of diplomatic missions and foreign affairs. By the twelfth century the logothete of the dromos was commonly the most important adviser of the emperor.

Aside from these major *logothetes* there were many other officials in the central bureaucracy, the heads of relatively small departments responsible for the various tasks and accounts required by the state. The changes in the bureaucracy at this time, just like those in the military, resulted in a significant downsizing and decentralization of the administration, although of course the emperor remained at the center of everything that had to do with the state. This did not mean that governmental decision-making was carried out at the provincial level, but rather that the diminished size of the state, and its inability to carry out everything that had been done in an earlier period, meant that the government simply was not as complex as it had been in the fourth to sixth centuries.

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